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City cathedrals resourcing rural churchgoers: a study on the impact of the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme

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ABSTRACT

One understanding of Anglican cathedrals is that their ministry, like the ministry of the bishop whose *cathedra* they house, stretches beyond the city and embraces the whole diocese. The advent of digital and online technology has brought the ministry of cathedrals much closer to homes throughout the diocese. The present study examines the impact of the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme developed by Liverpool Cathedral on the spiritual journey of one senior rural churchgoer who turned towards Liverpool Cathedral when her own rural church ceased to offer services during the pandemic. The data support the value of a programme designed to equip churchgoers to engage in depth with the Sunday Gospel before hearing the Gospel reading proclaimed during the Sunday Eucharist, whether in-person or online.

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Introduction

In a recent set of papers, Francis and colleagues have begun to explore the notion of cathedrals serving as episcopal resource churches. From a conceptual perspective (see Francis 2023), they have drawn on ecclesial roots to argue that cathedrals are called to do within dioceses what bishops are called to be, and on theological roots to argue that, following in Jesus' footsteps, two core aspects of this mission involve nurturing the twelve disciples (faith development), and equipping them to feed the five thousand (social justice). The present paper is concerned with the faith development agenda. From an empirical perspective Francis and colleagues have profiled, among other areas, the educational involvement and outreach of cathedrals both in terms of schools (McKenna, Francis, and Jones *in press*) and in terms of wider communities (Francis, McKenna, and Jones *in press*). The present paper is concerned with this wider engagement and focuses attention on the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme initiated by Liverpool Cathedral on Palm Sunday 2020 (<https://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/exploring-faith/exploring-the-sunday-gospel-resources/>).

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Introducing the Exploring the Sunday Gospel programme

The *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme has its roots in five areas: the identity of cathedrals within the Anglican tradition (as episcopal theological resource churches); the importance of discipleship learning; the centrality of the household in faith transmission, alongside schools and congregations; core assumptions regarding the primary constituency for these resources; and key pedagogical principles.

Discipleship learning

The notion of discipleship learning, as proposed and refined by Astley (2015), was adopted by Francis (2015) and clearly anchored and rooted in the narrative of Mark's Gospel where the primary activity of Jesus in displaying the reign of God was in drawing into his school of discipleship twelve key individuals. Among these twelve Jesus invested in a serious venture of facilitated learning, from the initial visit to the synagogue in Capernaum (where the scriptures were read and where the reign of God was displayed in overcoming demonic possession) until the disclosure at Caesarea Philippi. While Jesus was also concerned to feed the five thousand (and the four thousand), and to exercise a wide healing ministry, he nonetheless gave priority to shaping those whom he was equipping to share in that work. The notion of discipleship learning is grounded in the view that learning is not all in the mind, but rather reflected through life transformation. Learning is wider than education and may involve more than simply formation. Learning is not achieved by formal teaching alone, but needs facilitation as well. *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* is offered as standing within this tradition.

Centrality of the household

The centrality of the household in faith transmission has been demonstrated by a series of recent studies focusing on Anglicans in England, on Catholics in Britain, Ireland and Australia, and on Baptists in Canada, including work reported by Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018), Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, and McKenna (2019), Francis and Casson (2019), Francis (2020), Francis, Lankshear, Eccles, and McKenna (2020), Francis, McKenna, and Powell (2020), and Fawcett, Francis, and McKenna (2021). Churches in general acknowledge the essential synergy among three primary agencies in faith transmission: the home, the congregation, and the school. The Catholic Church in particular has noted the variable importance of these three agencies in relation to the social context. When the presence of the Church is not strong in society, the home moves into the position of first importance (see *Familiaris Consortio* 1656). The growing importance of the home was also highlighted by the Church of England in GS212, under the title, *Growing faith: Churches, schools, and households* (February 2019).

Exploring the Sunday Gospel is offered as a resource that speaks into this priority, arguing that households can only function as effective transmitters of faith, when the household itself fully engages in discipleship learning across the full age range. The household is then better equipped to empower and to motivate both schools and congregations. The core assumptions underpinning the programme are that:

- the Eucharist is at the centre of the cathedral, at the centre of parish churches, and at the centre of the diocese;
- in the Anglican tradition weight is given to both word and sacrament;
- the ministry of the word is resourced by the Revised Common Lectionary;
- households and schools engaging in preparation for the Sunday Eucharist will participate more intentionally offline and online.

Primary constituency

The *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* initiative focuses on households who are in contact with cathedrals and with parish churches throughout the dioceses. In this sense, households include people of all ages, living alone, or living in multi-generational units. It is fully recognised that not all households will wish to engage with this venture. But those who do may journey together in growing closer to and more engaged in the Sunday liturgy. Alongside this primary focus, cathedrals and local churches may become better equipped to retain families and young people who are in active or semi-active membership and by so doing develop a stronger platform from which to engage less committed and more transient members.

Pedagogical principles

The pedagogical principles underpinning the programme include:

- focusing throughout the week on the Gospel reading for the following Sunday;
- focusing on a concrete image at the heart of the Gospel reading;
- using a short Gospel prayer shaped on the Gospel reading;
- engaging in activities that can explore the Gospel reading and the concrete image;
- preparing material that can be a focus for online worship at home or can be brought to share or to display at the offline service.

Format and presentation of material

Each week the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme invites participants to engage with the following six activities. It is envisaged that some of these sections will appeal more than others to individual participants.

Dwelling with the text

This opening section invites participants to attend to the text from the four perspectives proposed in one method of biblical hermeneutics. This method draws in turn on the four psychological functions for acquiring and assessing information, generally known as Sensing, Intuition, Feeling, and Thinking. The theory recognises that different individuals will often prefer one of these functions over the others, but also encourages a fuller engagement with the text through employing all four functions (see Francis and Village 2008).

Thinking and talking

This section invites participants to identify topics within the passage that can get them thinking and talking. Some example topics are suggested. The section ends with the reoccurring question, ‘What does this narrative say to us today?’

Using your Bible

This section is designed to encourage participants to find their way around the Bible. Three main issues are explored in this section: How themes are sustained within a Gospel; How accounts vary among the Gospels; How the Gospels are rooted in the Old Testament.

Exploring online

The internet offers inexhaustible resources for exploring Gospel themes. This section offers a few carefully chosen suggestions and invites participants to follow their own curiosity as well. Links are not offered to specific sites.

Drawing on experience

One purpose of the concrete image is to stimulate conversation between the Gospel reading and personal experience. This section invites participants to get in touch with their own experience and does so by raising a few questions.

Creating and making

The final section is designed to stimulate creativity. But the programme does not close here. The section simply provides a springboard for more detailed development in age-specific resources.

The study

Liverpool Cathedral launched the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme on Palm Sunday 2020. That week in response to COVID-19 the British Government had imposed a lockdown of the nation and the Church of England had imposed a lockup on all its churches (McGowan 2020). Along with other cathedrals and parish churches, Liverpool Cathedral had locked its doors and made a valiant effort to explore digital technology as a way to serve its congregations.

The study is based on Brenda a rural churchgoer in her late seventies. Brenda’s local church was not in a position to provide online worship, and a friend drew her attention to the provision offered by Liverpool Cathedral. Brenda joined Liverpool Cathedral’s virtual congregation, spotted the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* material, and engaged with it. When later in the year the Cathedral invited participants to share their reflections on the programme, Brenda decided to do so. Almost every week between Pentecost 2020 and the Fourth Sunday of Easter 2022 Brenda emailed her reflections to the Cathedral. When churches began to open again Brenda found that her local church was no longer supporting a weekly service but had changed to one service a month. Liverpool Cathedral remained important for sustaining Brenda’s participation in worship and in discipleship learning.

Against this background the present study was designed to analyse Brenda's engagement with and responses to the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme over an 18-week period from Advent Sunday 2020 to Easter Sunday 2021. The analysis focused on the following four research questions.

- How has Brenda engaged with the weekly activities?
- What sort of engagement emerges?
- In what ways has the material encouraged Brenda's engagement?
- What can the programme learn from Brenda's engagement?

Method

The study employed content analysis of Brenda's written responses to the weekly activities that she was invited to complete. Many writers have defined and described the process of content analysis with most definitions referring to it as a form of data reduction. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) content analysis is 'the process of summarizing and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages' (674). The activities undertaken by Brenda across the 18 weeks of engagement followed the Revised Common Lectionary for 2020–2021, Year B. Table 1 identifies for each of these 18 weeks the Gospel passage, the theme, and the concrete image. For confidentiality Brenda's name is a pseudonym and any other names of people or places have been removed or anonymised.

Results and discussion

Brenda approached each section of the programme thoroughly and thoughtfully by undertaking all the activities. Some sections (Dwelling on the text; Using your Bible) were addressed succinctly by Brenda, while responses to other sections (Thinking and talking; Exploring online; Drawing on experience) were more detailed and descriptive. There were just a few places, usually in the 'Drawing on experience' section, where Brenda specifically articulated that she was 'not sure' how to respond. Despite this reticence, she often provided a response by asking a question or proposing a theory. In Week 14, when drawing on the concrete image of 'Spring cleaning' and her experience of 'Jesus using a whip of cords', she wrote, 'I find it difficult to understand what interpretation I should find in this reflection', but then continued, 'had Jesus been within [...] Church when I was objectionable with a friend, He would have readily corrected me for my behaviour in God's House'. In Week 15, when reflecting on the concrete image of 'Darkness' and her 'experiences of lights being dimmed in liturgy', she stated, 'I am not at all sure how to answer this', but then explained, 'I feel during the Eucharist the lights are metaphorically dimmed when, through respect our thoughts are dimmed as we accept and respect the sharing of the body and blood of Christ'.

**Table 1.** The materials explored by Brenda.

Week	Church calendar (Year B)	Gospel passage	Gospel theme	Concrete image
1	First Sunday of Advent	Mark 13: 24–37	Be prepared – watchfulness	Advent wreaths
2	Second Sunday of Advent	Mark 1: 1–8	Proclamation of John the Baptist	Christmas adverts
3	Third Sunday of Advent	John 1: 6–8, 19–28	John the Baptist	Making presents
4	Fourth Sunday of Advent	Luke 1: 26–38	Birth of Jesus foretold	Nativity stable
5	Christmas Day	Luke 2: 1–14	Birth of Jesus	Shepherds
6	Baptism of Christ	Mark 1: 4–11	Baptism of Jesus	Coronation
7	Second Sunday of Epiphany	John 1: 43–51	Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel	Ladders
8	Third Sunday of Epiphany	John 2: 1–11	Wedding at Cana	Making wine
9	Fourth Sunday of Epiphany	Mark 1: 21–28	Healing at Capernaum	Jigsaw puzzle
10	Candlemas	Luke 2: 22–40	Presentation of Christ in the Temple	Lights
11	Sunday Next Before Lent	Mark 9: 2–9	Transfiguration	Wearing white
12	First Sunday of Lent	Mark 1: 9–15	Temptations in the wilderness	Showman
13	Second Sunday of Lent	Mark 8: 31–38	Jesus foretells his death and resurrection	The cross
14	Third Sunday of Lent	John 2: 13–22	Jesus cleanses the Temple	Spring cleaning
15	Fourth Sunday of Lent	John 3: 14–21	Jesus and Nicodemus	Darkness
16	Fifth Sunday of Lent	John 12: 20–33	Grain of wheat	Seeds
17	Palm Sunday	Mark 11: 1–11	Jesus enters Jerusalem	Processional banners
18	Easter Day	Mark 16: 1–8	Empty tomb	Spring flowers

Dwelling with the text

Brenda consistently engaged with the text using all four functions of sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking. That she did so in such a thorough way suggests that she found the tasks neither tedious nor boring. In Week 13 (Jesus foretells his death and resurrection), her response was as follows:

(sensing) The details which catch my attention are that Jesus desperately needs his disciples to understand and accept that his death is imminent.

(intuition) The thing that sparks in my mind is that regardless of how long and how well they have known Jesus they, his disciples are too afraid to voice their fears to him following his comments to them.

(feeling) What most touches my heart in the passage is Peter's love for Jesus is such that it makes him at odds with Jesus, as he cannot comprehend that God would allow it to happen, and the obvious rebuke from Jesus would have been unbearable for Peter.

(thinking) What most makes me think in the passage is Jesus' discussion with the crowds as well as his disciples that those who believed his teaching should come after him carrying on his teachings telling that everyone that does so will be remembered by God but those who are too ashamed to teach the word of God will be shamed when Jesus returns to His Father, in heaven.

At times the invitation to focus on the four functions engaged Brenda in deeper thought about the texts and their meanings. Frequently, Brenda moved beyond description and into the realm of questioning scripture. She often questioned why someone within the text does or does not do something, or she queried the meaning of what is happening:

(intuition) God's choice of John the Baptist to prepare the people for Jesus . . . is this because John is similar in many ways to Isaiah whom God trusted to foresee his plans for his Son long before the time for Jesus' birth? (Week 3, John the Baptist)

(thinking) when Moses and Elijah appeared and were speaking with Jesus all appeared natural to him, did he know that they would appear as part of his Transfiguration therefore he would of course converse with them and was he aware of all that would happen that day on the mountain? (Week 11, Transfiguration)

Sometimes she was motivated to propose insightful theories of her own. In Week 8, when exploring 'The wedding at Cana' and using the feeling function to reflect on Mary telling the servants to do whatever Jesus asked of them, she raised the question, 'was this a mother's faith in her son, or maternal interference?'.

Talking and thinking

In this section those engaging in the programme are invited to identify topics within the passage of scripture that get them thinking and talking. Five prompts are provided to help with this activity. As Brenda was working alone and so had no-one with whom to engage in discussion, she chose to address each prompt in turn. In this context the prompts became Brenda's conversation partner. Brenda's engagement with the text and her explanations of her understandings of them were detailed and insightful.

When explaining the presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration (Week 11), and then comparing the voice at the Transfiguration with the voice at the Baptism, she noted:

I think Moses and Elijah were at the transfiguration as they had spoken with God prior to this on several occasions but had not seen His face, they were aware of the prophesy of Jesus and with the transfiguration they would see God through his Son, face to face. . . . it was the same, God voice - only his words were different. At the baptism He was speaking to Jesus 'You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased' but at the transfiguration He was speaking to those present in 'this is my beloved son - hear him'.

When prompted in Week 14 (Jesus cleanses the Temple), concerning what she makes of Jesus using a whip of cords, she contrasted Jesus' anger and fury with the fact that this is out of character:

Jesus is usually shown as gentle, caring and concerned for the welfare of others It was his intention of displaying the full force of his anger, constructing the whip to enforce his fury and encourage the violators to vacate the temple.

In Week 15 when exploring the relationship between Jesus and Nicodemus, she wrote:

I think the significance of Nicodemus, coming to Jesus by night was because he was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin Council and knew it would not be safe for him to be seen speaking with Jesus, of whom he was a believer, during the hours of daylight I believe that Jesus invited and led Nicodemus to His light when he answered truthfully the questions raised by Nicodemus and pointed out how followers would be led by his life; Nicodemus was sympathetic to Jesus knowing how the Pharisees were treating him, he showed belief in Jesus and I feel he would readily have been accepted by Jesus.

When invited to consider topics that might get her 'Thinking and talking', Brenda often responded by posing a question or offering a theory. The prompts simulated conversation allowing Brenda to deepen her focus and engagement with the text. They led her to make rich and insightful observations. In Week 11 (Transfiguration), when addressing the significance of the mountain within the text, she explained it as, 'a bridge between earth and heaven' and that 'Jesus feels closer to God when he is in the mountains'. In Week 18 (Empty tomb), when prompted 'How do you read the significance of the timing 'very early on the first day of the week?' she proposed that Easter Day was perhaps the first time that Sunday had been recognised as the first day of the week:

it was the first day of the week and the third day since his crucifixion which would be the Sunday. The Jewish Sabbath was a Saturday, was this the first time Sunday was recognised as the first day of the week?

In Week 16 (Grain of wheat) she explained the significance of the 'grain of wheat':

it denotes Jesus who dies but like the grain, on his death he 'germinates into many more ears of wheat' in that his followers continue his work and more people believed and were turned to God.

In Week 15 (Jesus and Nicodemus), when pondering on the meaning of the words, 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world', she

expressed the view that God sent Jesus not to give up on the world but to change the world:

That He was not prepared to give up on the world he had created . . . instead he sent Jesus, giving them an opportunity to change their ways through His love and the teachings and actions of His Son in leading them in the truth and light to God.

While the prompts provided assisted Brenda in engaging in detailed conversation about the text, it was nonetheless a one-sided conversation. The absence of a peer communicating with Brenda in real time meant that she did not have others to bounce her ideas off, to consider other views, or to move her thoughts in a new direction. Occasionally it appears that Brenda was so embedded in her own worldview shaped by Christian teaching that it prevented her from exploring ideas in new ways. For example, in Week 10 (Presentation of Christ), when commenting on her understanding of Luke's balance between Simeon and Anna, she identified them simply as 'both were known to God'. If Brenda had been in conversation with a partner reading the text from an inclusive standpoint, then the presence of Anna might have been articulated as Jesus advocating equality. Anna as a female is seen as equal to Simeon as represented in their standing within the community, association with the Temple, and in being known to God.

The final prompt in the 'Thinking and talking' section invited Brenda to sum up how the Gospel passage might be understood in today's world. Brenda's responses were usually succinct one sentence reflections expressed in simple and concrete terms. They were clearly shaped by her own position and understanding of the Bible and Christianity.

Week 2 (Proclamation of John the Baptist) . . . emphasises the importance of not putting off preparation to accept God's Son into your life, as if we put it off we may leave it too late.

Week 13 (Jesus foretells his death and resurrection) . . . that only by putting our love and faith in God and being there for others are we doing as Jesus taught us throughout his life.

Working in co-operation with others may have allowed Brenda to consider other perspectives and equally allowed others to learn from Brenda about the Christian values expressed in the Bible.

Using your Bible

Brenda completed this section diligently, as she engaged with the Bible and explored its content. Sometimes she summarised the verses presented. Week 9 (Healing at Capernaum), is a good example of this approach:

Matthew (4:22–25) tells of the calling of James and John and then Simon Peter and Andrew, in both cases brothers, by the Sea of Galilee where they were fishing with their respective father's whom they simply left and followed Jesus. He told them that in future they would become 'fishers of men'.

Mark (8:27–30) Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is and they tell him one of the prophets, he then asks who they believe him to be and when they declare him to be the Christ. Jesus then tells them they are to keep this knowledge to themselves.

Brenda was also skilful in illustrating how the Gospels are rooted in the Old Testament. For example, in Week 4 (Birth of Jesus foretold) when exploring Luke's account of the Annunciation, Brenda noted that:

Genesis (18:13–14) These verses tell of an earlier time when Sarah and Abraham, like Elizabeth and Zacharias were given a child by God when they were old.

Isaiah (7:14) and Isaiah (9:6–7) Isaiah tells of a virgin having a son whose name would be Emmanuel which translated means 'God With Us', foretelling the Annunciation of Mary and the birth of Jesus who would rule over the world.

When prompted to do so, she engaged in a comparison of verses. In Week 6 (Baptism of Jesus), Brenda competently compared Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus with the accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

Luke (3:3–22) Luke refers to Isaiah's preaching referring to John as 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare for the coming of Jesus' and of the people receiving God's salvation. Luke also speaks of the people that should share with those who have nothing, for publicans not to overcharge and for the military not to abuse their position of authority. The people queried whether John was the promised Christ, which he rejected. These points were not mentioned in either Mark or Matthew's accounts.

As the weeks progress, it is possible to see how Brenda extended the activity and was motivated by and confident enough to give her own interpretation of the Bible verses she was exploring, often using languages such as, 'This I feel shows . . .'. This is evidenced in her response in Week 8 (Wedding at Cana), when exploring images of the wedding feast in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew (22:1–14) In his Gospel Matthew relates the story of the King whose son was marrying and of the invitations sent to the wealthy neighbours and of their rejection to his invitations. Instead, his servants brought in all poor and destitute people to enjoy the feast. This I feel shows that by choosing the poor and infirm God would be pleased of our being prepared to help those unfortunate people.

And again, in Week 11 (Transfiguration), when exploring the significance of Peter, James and John in the Gospel of Mark, Brenda noted:

Mark (5:37) when Jesus was going to heal a young girl he asked for only Peter James and John to accompany him, which again I feel was that he saw them as the most reliable of his disciples to witness his work.

Exploring online

This section of the programme was addressed at length by Brenda. The programme does not provide specific web addresses and it is this omission that allowed Brenda to undertake her own exploration of what was available more widely to resource her engagement with the material under study. For Brenda, who was working alone, this is an opportunity to access alternative ideas and understandings. It is clear from Brenda's detailed and informed written responses that she was motivated to spend a considerable amount of time on this activity. Material was drawn from multiple web-based sources and incorporated a range of different perspectives on any given scriptural passage or concrete image. In presenting what she had found Brenda often included her own observations, provided

her own interpretation, pondered on something, or extended discussion to beyond the religious.

In Week 6 (Baptism of Jesus) Brenda was prompted to explore four themes connected to the concrete image of 'Coronation': the baptism of Jesus in art; coronation in art; the enthronement Psalms; and adult baptism in the Church of England. For the Baptism of Jesus in art she observed that most show Jesus with John the Baptist in the water of the River Jordan and also noted the familiar presence of either 'doves' or 'clouds parting'. She gave examples of three coronation ceremonies (The Virgin Mary at the Annunciation; King George VI; Queen Elizabeth II) and identified six enthronement psalms which she concluded were all focused on 'praise'. Finally, in explaining adult baptism in the Church of England she went beyond describing the outward signs of baptism, included exploration of the theological symbolism of the sacrament, and discussed different beliefs about baptism found within the Church:

The candidates are usually baptized by a bishop, when they give the baptismal promises for themselves or recite the Apostles Creed. The bishop lays his hands on their heads or sometimes anoints them with Holy oil when they become members of God's Church. They renounce their sins and make known their beliefs in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit following Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Sometimes others, baptised as children, are also baptised as adults as they believe that faith cannot exist before the age of accountability.

In Week 18 (Empty tomb), when encouraged to widen her exploration of Mark's account of the empty tomb by looking for information on 'the ending to Mark's Gospel' and on 'Easter celebrations across the world', Brenda's response exceeded 350 words. She first noted that, 'Mark deliberately ended his Gospel at verse 8 to create curiosity with regard to what happened to Jesus, encouraging people to return to church to learn the rest of the story'. She then gave a very detailed and informative account of different Easter celebrations:

As people celebrate Spring the world over and so it is usual to celebrate Easter after the 1st full moon following the first day of Spring. More than any other country Ethiopia celebrates Easter following fifty-five days of fasting. Around the world ninety-five countries celebrate Easter, in Europe, Asia, Africa and the United States of America. The word Easter originates from England from the name of a goddess, Eostre. In Italy there are parades throughout the country, churches in African are decorated with material depicting flowers and butterflies. To most Christians it is the second most Holy Festival after Christmas Day, when church attendance is a given, when churches are decorated and when I was a child we were encouraged to make an Easter bonnet out of tissue paper and decorate it with flowers, and most mothers and grandmothers bought a new hat! Current trends see America with the life size Easter Bunny parades, Easter Eggs and baskets filled with various candies. We in The UK have the Easter Eggs, Hot Cross Buns on Good Friday, Bermuda spend Good Friday flying kites and eating Cod fish cakes – somewhere in all of this throughout the world, I pray we remember the true reason we celebrate Easter, in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brenda frequently extended her observations beyond the descriptive to include her own commentary or her reflections on what she had discovered. In Week 4 (Birth of Jesus foretold), when prompted to explore classical images of Mary at the Annunciation, she noted the presence of angels including the Angel Gabriel and the dove descending on Mary, but also drew attention to 'a spray of lilies' which

she interpreted as denoting ‘Mary’s purity, innocence and of her connection with God’. In the same week, when exploring the concrete image of the ‘Nativity stable’, she pondered on the absence of the inn, ‘but none showed the stable being attached to an Inn’. In Week 10 (Presentation of Jesus in the Temple), when exploring the concrete image of ‘Lights’, she drew attention to depictions of Jesus, ‘holding a candle in the palm of His hands, as the Light of the World’. Other images of light, she noted, were of ‘castles and houses lit up at Christmas and at other Festivals’. She then extended discussion to images of ‘the speed of light’, ‘general illuminations’, and ‘light flashing out from lighthouses protecting ships from danger at sea’, which she then compared to her understanding of Christianity, ‘as Jesus safeguarded his disciples whilst they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee’. In Week 13 (Jesus foretells his death and resurrection), when explaining different images of the cross, she drew attention to the different denominations that could be discerned from the type of cross they favour, ‘some crosses are highly decorative as in Catholic churches whereas the Church of England favours a strong, solid but plain cross in the main’. She then proposed an interesting observation about a potential link between the shape of a cross and a ship’s anchor:

Not all are specifically religious symbols of the cross. I wonder if the anchor of a ship is deliberately similar in shape to the cross, perhaps originating from an ancient fishing industry asking for Christ to watch over them as they fished?

In Week 14 (Jesus cleanses the Temple) Brenda’s online exploration led her to a poem, ‘The cleansing of the Temple’ by Malcolm Guite, which she described as:

a wonderfully sensitive poem which follows the connection Jesus has with the Temple in Jerusalem from his time as a baby at his mother’s cleansing, to his return at the age of twelve, through to his fury with his anger portrayed through the whip. The last four lines are in my mind particularly poignant.

Drawing on experience

This section calls for a personal response to the Gospel reading and to the concrete image. Brenda’s responses were uniquely personal, providing a bridge between the Word of God and her lived experience.

In Week 1 (Be prepared/watchfulness), when reflecting on times she has had to stay awake watching for something to happen, she wrote about her experience of childbirth and of spending time with those in the later stages of life:

My experience of staying awake and watching have been during sweet moments and also during moments of utter desolation. During labour with my children, both of whom decided to arrive during the hours of darkness, it was not difficult to stay awake by necessity. I have shared the last moment of their lives with many members of my family, none as important to me as my mother, and my sister when it was a comfort to me to sit beside them albeit in heartbreak, as they passed away.

In Week 9 (Healing at Capernaum), the concrete image used to stimulate reflection on Mark’s account of the healing in the synagogue at Capernaum is ‘Jigsaw puzzle’. When

Brenda reflected on her own experience of needing healing, she recounted times in her life when she had needed help both mentally and physically. She described a near death experience and expressed her feelings about how her life was saved:

I have been tormented by my own devils in what now seems like a former life and came through the ordeal with only a few remaining scars and memories best forgotten When in 2010 I was later told that I had had only four to six months to live when I was given the gift of a kidney, I was both thankful and grateful but then the realisation that the donor aged fifty had lost his life in order for me to live, I found it very hard to come to terms with and even today I pray for his widow and children who lost their husband and father for me to benefit and my life continue.

In Week 18 (Empty tomb), when drawing upon her experience of Easter services, she combined this experience with her understanding of the symbolism of the services:

I have been moved over the past decade or two to have been introduced to the removal of the altar cloth on Good Friday and having the Altar Cross swathed in linen as an acknowledgement of Christ crucified – which is then followed on Easter Day with the beauty of the church decorated with white lilies in celebration of the risen Christ and the awakening of new life.

Frequently Brenda's personal narrative revealed the importance of her links with family and friends. In Week 2 (Proclamation of John the Baptist), when explaining how she gets ready for Christmas, she recalled several family traditions:

We prepare for Christmas by remembering family, friends, and old work colleagues by sending them cards with a letter of our happenings over the past year. We will join our friends at . . . Church on Christmas morning Once home from church . . . a place is always set at our table for an absent family member, an old habit which my mother began when I was too small to understand and one which I always keep in both parent's memory.

In Week 8 (Wedding at Cana), she gave a very detailed account of 'wedding feasts', drawing on her own wedding and those of her son and daughter, 'My most memorable are those of my children and myself'. She reflected on the differences between them, her daughter's 'grand affair' with the reception at a country manor, her son's overseas with the reception 'overlooking the ocean' and with an 'exotic' feast. These were contrasted with her own registry office wedding followed by a blessing and then a reception at her mother-in-law's house for which she did her own catering. In Week 18 (Empty tomb), when reflecting on the concrete image of 'Spring flowers', she made links with her mother and grandmother and their role in the transmission of faith, explaining that her experience:

began with a hyacinth bulb which my Grandmother gave me as early as possible each year to grow as my donation to the decorating of [. . .] Church for Easter; this taught me from an early age at her knee, what Easter celebrated and why. My mother always grew snowdrops and daffodils which if we were lucky survived the winter in the ground and were in bloom to celebrate the arrival of spring. The daffodils again were taken in part to the church for decoration when the ladies of the church beautified it as at all festivals.

From Brenda's written reflections it was apparent that the prompts in this section of the programme had facilitated a spirit of enquiry with evidence of deeper

thinking stimulated and new ideas emerging. Moreover, Brenda was self-aware in recognising that this new learning had taken place. In Week 3 (John the Baptist), when reflecting on how she experiences John the Baptist during Advent, she revealed that this gave rise to something she had not thought about before:

In all honesty I had never before considered John the Baptist when thinking of Advent but to me now he has a very important part in the coming of Christ. His preparation for Jesus and his unselfishness in stepping back upon Jesus' arrival in Jordon without a word for all the work and effort he had put in to smooth Jesus' path, is paramount in showing us we should be unselfish and welcome Jesus into our lives as John readily did without question, during Advent and always.

In Week 10 (Presentation of Jesus in the Temple), when thinking about her experience of seeing something in a new light, she asserted that the activities she had undertaken as part of the *Exploring Sunday Gospel* programme, specifically those she engaged with during weeks 8 and 10, had led her to reconsider her previous understanding of the Gospel readings for those weeks.

I have found on so many occasions whilst exploring the Sunday Gospel at Home, that I see things in a new light when reading and understanding the passage than I would previously have done. After seeing Mary's presence at the Wedding in Cana in entirely the wrong way I try now to read the passage more fully and think of alternatives to my immediate thoughts. That said I seem to have had a fixation with Simeon during this Sunday's narrative to the detriment of other possibly more important details.

The importance of the programme for enabling Brenda to practise her faith, particularly when attendance in church was a challenge, was revealed in Week 12 (Temptations). She recounted how important it was for her to hear read aloud the Temptations of Jesus each year at the beginning of Lent during church services, but then added 'being unable to visit church I am thankful for the opportunity to cover it in the Sunday Gospel at Home'.

Finding humour

Throughout the 'Exploring online' and 'Drawing on experience' sections of the programme, Brenda exhibited humour in her reflections. In Week 4 (Birth of Jesus foretold), when the concrete image is the 'Nativity stable' and she was describing her experience of nativity plays, she recounted funny vignettes of both the first nativity play in which she herself took part and those of her children and grandchildren:

I still remember the first nativity play I was in, I so wanted to be Mary but when parts were allocated I was a sheep. . . I would even then have been happier as a shepherd as I thought the wearing of a tea towel on my head with a band of cord tied around it would have been impressive but I was one of three sheep with one word only to say or rather bleat – baa, baa, baa! School nativity plays were always the highlight of the year. . . . One year an 'angel' left her place and decided baby Jesus wanted to go for a walk and took the doll out of the manger and disappeared stage left, with a crying Mary in hot pursuit and the anxious teacher excusing herself as she also left the tableau. It was difficult not to smile . . . my Grandson was seven when having been happy to be the Frankincense King – insisting it was the Frankenstein King – however, when the day of the three kings visit to see Baby Jesus dawned

and he was given his outfit to wear he refused to go on stage wearing 'a dress' as he put it and could not be persuaded otherwise; in the event the audience were told that only two had arrived at the stable, the third king was still travelling.

In Week 14 (Jesus cleanses the Temple), when comparing her experience of church cleaning with that of Mole in *Wind in the Willows*, she recalled how she and the other church cleaners, 'like Mole by the end of our endeavours we were in desperate need of remedial cleaning ourselves'.

Creating and making

Across the 18 weeks Brenda did not undertake any of the activities in the 'Creating and making' section. There may have been good reasons for this. These activities might be more suitable to a joint endeavour, as part of a family or group situation, and may not have appealed to Brenda's personal aptitudes.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to analyse engagement with and responses to the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme (offered by Liverpool Cathedral) evidenced by a rural churchgoer in her late seventies (Brenda), over an 18-week period from Advent Sunday 2020 to Easter Sunday 2021. The aim was to explore the impact of the programme for resourcing rural churchgoers living at some distance from the cathedral. The analyses focused on four research questions.

The first research question looked at how Brenda had engaged with the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme. It was clear that Brenda had applied herself consistently, diligently, and thoroughly across the 18 weeks of the programme. She was motivated to engage in the programme on a weekly basis and omitted only five out of a possible 323 activities within the sections with which she had engaged. Throughout her responses were detailed and thorough. When she encountered a challenging activity or a task that she was at first unsure how to approach, she persevered and often took this as an opportunity to raise a new question or to propose a theory of her own.

The second research question explored the type of engagement that emerged from Brenda's involvement in the programme. Brenda engaged intelligently and insightfully across all sections of the programme with which she engaged, frequently extending the activities beyond what they initially asked for. Her responses were often rich, thoughtful, and reflective. Rather than simply acquiring information, Brenda was fully engaged in the learning process. She displayed evidence of critical thinking by posing her own questions and theories in an inquiring way. She was not a passive recipient of the weekly scripture. Rather, she was completely engaged with each Gospel reading and the concrete images, adding her own commentary and reflections on what she was reading and discovering (Week 4, Birth of Jesus foretold; Week 10, Lights). In this way she was more engaged with the Sunday liturgy and was growing closer to it. As well as engaging in a studious way, Brenda also reflected humorously on the material she explored. In Week

4 (Nativity stable) and Week 14 (Spring cleaning) she recalled funny anecdotes about her involvement in school plays and with church cleaning.

The third research question investigated the ways in which the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme had encouraged the engagement of Brenda. The material allowed Brenda to explore and learn, to focus on meaning and understanding, to contribute, and to be productive. The structure of the material with six differently styled activities encouraged different kinds of learning. She was given the opportunity to ask questions, to construct meaning, to provide her own insights, and to think deeply. She was given texts to explore (Dwelling with the text; Thinking and talking; Using your Bible), themes to reflect on (Thinking and talking; Exploring online; Drawing on experience) and concrete images to focus on (Drawing on experience). In the 'Dwelling with the text' and 'Using your Bible' sections she was participating in tasks that drew on her analytical and problem-solving skills to explore the ministry of the word. In the 'Dwelling with the text' section, Brenda gives equal attention to all four of the psychological functions within the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics (Sensing, Intuition, Feeling, Thinking). In the 'Using your Bible' section, her skills of biblical scholarship were developed not only when she summarised key verses from the New Testament, but when she located and compared these with their roots in the Old Testament (Week 4, Birth of Jesus foretold; Week 6, Jesus' baptism).

In the 'Thinking and talking' section, Brenda was encouraged to make connections and build relationships between important information and ideas. Meaningful open-ended prompts in this section formed the basis of her learning and are especially important in the context of Brenda completing the activities alone. Her engagement with the scriptural text, her comparison of different material, and her explanations of her understandings of them are detailed and insightful. For example, in Week 11 she compared the voice at the Transfiguration and at the Baptism of Jesus, and in Week 18 she proposed that Easter Day was perhaps the first time that Sunday had been recognised as the first day of the week. This section (together with the concrete image provided in the 'Drawing on experience' section) also allowed Brenda to apply her knowledge of the scriptural reading to its meaning in the present day. It was an opportunity for her to consider how the biblical narratives might apply to the world outside and beyond the Church.

However, the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme does not focus on imparting of knowledge alone. Rather, by providing themes and concrete images that can be explored and investigated alongside the Gospel readings, faith development is nurtured. In the 'Exploring online' section the absence of any pre-defined websites allowed Brenda choice in what she chose to explore and the material she chose to engage with. She is encouraged to pursue her own interests. This allowed her to be curious and independent, and she is motivated to complete this section at great length. In Week 4 her exploration of 'Coronation' revealed her observation skills and her descriptive ability, but also her theological understanding of the symbolism of baptism. In Week 18 she provided a detailed explanation of Easter celebrations around the world. This section also provided her with the opportunity for exploring the creative arts. In Week 4 she explored classical images of Mary at the Annunciation and in Week 14 her online exploration led her to a poem by Malcolm Guite.

Sometimes analytical, problem-solving, and creative skills are seen as mutually exclusive. In the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme opportunities to engage in all these different styles of learning are encouraged and combined across the programme. In the 'Drawing on experience' section, and specifically the use of the concrete image as an aid to unlocking thoughts and feelings, Brenda was able to draw on her own inner resources. For example, in Week 9 the concrete image of the 'Jigsaw puzzle' allowed her to reflect in a deeply personal way on the times in her life when she has needed healing. This section also allowed her to recall family and friends and the part they played in traditions such as at Christmas (Week 2) or at Weddings (Week 8). Here Brenda was able to apply her Gospel learning and understanding to authentic situations. This section was also successful in supporting Brenda's spirit of enquiry with evidence of deeper thinking and new ideas emerging. The prompts encouraged Brenda to be self-reflective about her knowledge and understanding. Week 3 led to her giving consideration to the role of John the Baptist during Advent, something to which previously she had not given much consideration. In Week 8 she noted that her previous thinking about the role of Mary as Jesus' mother at the Wedding at Cana was challenged.

Finally, the fourth research question aimed to assess what could be learned from Brenda's engagement for the future development and resourcing of the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme. The programme of facilitated learning was designed to be accessed at home and explored by individuals working alone or by households engaging with intergenerational exploration. The present study has demonstrated that Brenda's engagement working alone can be viewed as successful. It has maintained her motivation and enriched her growth in discipleship. As someone living at some distance from the Cathedral, the programme was resourcing Brenda for richer engagement with the online services that she accessed within her own home on a Sunday. Now rather than watching those online services as a passive spectator, Brenda's preparation for the service during the preceding week could motivate her to become a more active participant in the services. Developmentally, the programme may wish to consider ways of helping to facilitate reciprocal conversation either online or in-person. Brenda's construction of meaning might have been enhanced with access to the thoughts and reflections of other programme users. They too would have the opportunity to learn from Brenda.

Further research is now needed to examine how the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme works among other constituencies, including in particular intergenerational households and those who are participating not with online worship, but with in-person attendance within the Cathedral or parish churches.

Ethical considerations

This study received approval from the St Mary's Centre Ethics Committee (SMC21EC0011).

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Data availability statement

Data are available from the corresponding author, L.J.F., upon reasonable request.

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